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ABSTRACT

Debate can provide a format for the development of communication skills to aid students in managing conflicts, because an understanding of rule-governed communication in conflict situations is invaluable in constructive conflict management. Since in debate procedural rules restrict discussion primarily to substantive and procedural topics, debate practice enables students to argue in a rule-bound context. An awareness of communication rules alerts the students to the expectations of appropriate behavior and equips him or her to deal with them. Approaching the argumentation and debate course in a learning laboratory orients students to the basic concept of debate as a rule-governed conflict in substantive and procedural areas. Debate skills need not be limited to the public forum, but can be usefully adapted and applied to a range of interpersonal situations in which conflict is primarily in substantive and procedural areas. Laboratory situations range from informal dyads and groups (in which participants discuss, negotiate, and decide on the rules to be followed) to the formal debate (in which two or four people interact in role-assigned ways following the more formal rules of organized debate). (DF)

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DEBATE AS ENCAPSULATED CONFLICT:

RULED CONTROVERSY AS AN APPROACH TO LEARNING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

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DEBATE AS ENCAPSULATED CONFLICT: RULED CONTROVERSY AS AN APPROACH TO LEARNING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS[1]

From an educational perspective debate can be viewed as a valuable learning laboratory for various communication skills. One area in which skills can be developed is that in which communication enters into conflict management. To accomplish this requires that debate and its requisite skills be fitted into the larger system of speech-communication. We sense that viewing debate as an approach to conflict management within this larger system is frequently overlooked by those who regard tournament circuit practices as limiting debate to tournament competition.[2] Therefore, the perspective of this essay provides a useful approach for using debate as a learning laboratory for additional skills. Specifically, we propose that debate can provide a format in which communication skills can be developed that will aid students in managing conflicts. In order to show how this proposal can be a valuable approach for speech-communication educators, the essay consists of two sections: (1) the conceptual orientation--debate as rule-governed conflict, and (2) the pedagogical applications--debate as a learning laboratory.

Debate As Rule-Governed Conflict

First, one needs to understand the pedagogical value of applying "communication rules" concepts to conflict communication training.[3] Some interesting possibilities have been raised for using the rules perspective for researching communication in organizations[4] and for descriptive-interpretative studies of communication in conflict management.[5] For our purposes we will turn our attention to a third emphasis and consider how an

understanding of rule-governed[6] communication in conflict situations can assist a student in managing conflict constructively.

As a basis for discussing and applying communication rules to debate, we use Tom Knutson's definition of interpersonal conflict as "a disagreeing interact."[7] While this definition is clearly inadequate for the theoretician or experimentalist, the conceptual "wastebasket" use of the term is helpful pedagogically by emphasizing the innumerably large range of areas on which two people can disagree. Several sources[8] have used a three-part typology of conflict that distinguishes among substantive (dealing with ideas, information and interpretations thereof, goals, policies, decisions, use and/or distribution of resources, values and beliefs, etc.), meta-discussional (dealing with procedural matters of interaction including the agenda items, how to go about doing something, etc.), and affective (dealing with attitudes, relationship issues, personality features, attribution of motives, etc.). The types labelled substantive and metadiscussional are particularly relevant to our concerns.

As a basis for discussing and applying communication rules to debate, we must also refer to Cushman and Whiting's two basic types of rules which are "those which specify the action's content (its meaning, what it is to count as) and those which specify the procedures appropriate to carry out the action."[9] The writers illustrate, "In chess, certain rules constitute the game while others guide it. When a novice asks to be taught chess he expects a statement of the rules which constitute and guide the game. The good teacher will provide these at a rate commensurate with the novice's capacity. When he becomes capable of engaging in the game it is because he shares with an opponent a sufficiently developed set of rules to define the content and procedures of chess."[10] While we recognize the importance of

consensual rules in attributing meaning to symbols, our central concern is with procedural rules. For our pedagogical purpose we focus on the fact that in any communicative encounter a person benefits by having some sense of the rules which govern the way he proceeds; such knowledge indicates to some degree the appropriate choices in behavior when interacting.[11]

In the debate context procedural rules of communication are important because they are the standards which determine the issues on which conflict is permitted and the manner in which the differing positions are presented and defended. These standards limit debate conflict primarily to substantive matters (note typology above) although elements of metadiscussional conflicts are almost always present. The substantive conflicts deal with such things as the arguments, reasoning, and supporting materials used to advocate a position relative to a "problem" area in which the particular problem of concern is clearly specified, a practical and workable plan of action for dealing with it is presented, and the benefits of the plan over the present approach or approaches are justified. Attention is focused upon the relative strength and thoroughness of the advocates' arguments, reasoning, and supporting evidence. During a debate the participants frequently conflict about exactly what standards should be used in coming to a decision about the best position. They may differ, for instance, about that which constitutes the "significance" of a problem. For example, some people seeking change in a present governmental policy have argued that the potential damage of a nuclear power reactor accident should warrant the phase-out of all nuclear reactors despite a low though undetermined probability of such an accident occurring. In academic debate the advocates essentially have asked for a suspension of the frequently used criterion of "significance" which would include a quantified cost/benefit analysis in which the harm and probability of the

harm occurring are clearly specified. In sum, then, while debate procedural rules limit conflict to substantive issues, some elasticity is permitted in allowing advocates to propose and argue for the criteria that should be used in rendering a judgment about the best course of action.

One other feature of communication rules and their function should be mentioned in relation to debate: some rules are formal and codified while others are informal and uncodified. The degree of formality and informality of rules followed by interactants will vary considerably with different situations and with different people. For instance, in the law courts formal procedures are typically so specified that only persons carefully trained in using those procedures are allowed to participate. However, if in a conversation two people argue about some issue of personal importance, the "rules" of the dispute are determined by the individuals (consciously or unconsciously), and it is likely that the only codified guidelines are those specifying penalties for the use of physical force. For academic debate the rules of conflict interaction are fairly well specified. Typically, the standards indicate what is acceptable in the areas of argument, selection and use of supporting materials, organization and clarity, analysis of issues (including the identification of the assumptions and values of differing positions), and critical evaluation of an opposing position (traditionally referred to as refutation). While a number of debate textbooks suggest "codified" standards for conducting and evaluating a debate, few if any participants follow these standards precisely. Recognition has been made of the differing informal, "uncodified" rules which judges apply in evaluating a debate by the recent discussion and publishing of judging "philosophies" followed by individual judges.[12] Presumably, the challenge for the debaters is to adapt their efforts to the rules or standards followed by a particular judge. The

overall point here is that any conflict (debate being one illustration thereof) functions according to certain rules (formal and informal), and participants would do well to recognize them.

Debate As A Learning Laboratory

With the communication rules orientation as a foundation we now turn to ways in which various debate formats can provide experiences in which students may develop communication skills which will enable them to manage conflicts more effectively. In order for this program to be best understood we preface its presentation with several assumptions on which it rests. First, we feel that any debate training should be introduced by instructors and viewed by students as merely a limited part of the larger system of communication skill development. Unless debate practices are examined within a broad range of situations, relationships, kinds of conflict, and other variables, little sensitivity will likely develop in knowing what communication behaviors are appropriate in different situations. It should be recognized that in debate training attention is limited to managing substantive and procedural conflicts; the affective dimension is largely ignored. Second, communication in conflictful situations should be of primary interest to the speech-communication educator. This serves to emphasize concern with helping the student acknowledge conflict as a normal, expected, and frequently occurring element of social living and assisting him in participating more constructively therein. In this light we believe that an awareness of communication rules alerts the student to the expectations of appropriate behavior that persons hold and better enables him to identify, adapt to, attempt to modify, and/or in some way deal with expectations. Third, debate skills need not be limited to public policy or legal advocacy

(in other words, such skills need not be limited to the public forum). They can be usefully adapted and applied to a range of interpersonal situations in which conflict is primarily substantive or procedural. A dyadic or group discussion may be benefitted greatly by the careful statement of a position (arguments or reasons and supports for them presented with understandable organization) and a statement of reasons why it is a beneficial choice to make. In turn differing positions can be shared and critically evaluated by participants in light of some acceptable standard, i.e., the rules. Finally, competitive academic debate should be only one of several kinds of laboratory situations made available to students for learning the skills involved. The rigidities and peculiarities of competitive debate may well provide an important learning laboratory for students by compelling them to adapt to a relatively formalized set of rules. In addition, however, more cooperatively structured and informally regulated situations should provide practice in conflict skills. After all, students will encounter both competitively and cooperatively structured conflict situations in college and in other social and professional situations.

Given these assumptions the learning laboratory program as we conceive it would fit into an "argumentation and debate" course. As preparation for the exercises, the initial class meetings will be spent reviewing general communication principles and their application to conflictful interaction.[13] The concept of communication rules is introduced just prior to the discussion of specifics of argumentation theory and the debate format. Throughout the program, debate is viewed as a form of rule-governed, substantive, and procedural conflict.

After the initial orientation to basic concepts, exercises can be introducted which require relevant communication skills. Here the emphasis focuses

on the need for a clear statement of positions (arguments) and the rationale for them (reasoning and supporting evidence) as important basic skills. Students then interact in a variety of situations (e.g., in informal dyads and groups, and in more formal speeches and brief debates), and much of it is done with only peer evaluation and feedback. The purpose in the early stages is to get the students to share disagreements, to be able to give reasons for their positions, and to receive feedback on how others perceived the effectiveness of their participation in the conflict.

A second set of experiences focuses on the use of analysis and refutation. At this point it is assumed that students have mastered adequately the ability to organize their ideas, state arguments clearly, and provide adequate supporting evidence for their ideas and arguments. Students are instructed to analyze their own positions and those of others by determining the fundamental sources of conflict as carefully as possible and by identifying the values and other assumptions made when taking a position on a controversy. Similarly, participants are asked to evaluate critically positions taken in terms of the kinds and quality of arguments, reasoning, and support used. They are encouraged to look for additional problems, e.g., disadvantages that may develop from taking a particular course of corrective action. The main emphasis throughout is to review critically the initial positions taken in a controversy and point out the assumptions, implications, strengths, and weaknesses surrounding them.

The third set of experiences combines the skills necessary for the earlier sets and directs attention to the development and modification of positions during a controversy. Participants are encouraged to do the following: 1) state positions, 2) receive challenges to those positions, 3) challenge differing positions taken, 4) rebuild, defend, clarify, or adjust

to those challenges, and 5) further challenge defenses or original positions. The point, of course, is to allow students to participate openly in conflict on substantive issues and examine how well they are able to function during the duration of the conflictful interaction.

Although topics used for the exercises may vary, we recommend the use of the current intercollegiate debate topic for several reasons. One reason is that it provides students with a socially or politically relevant subject, which is also broad enough to be researched over an extended period of time by a number of students. Second, resources for such a topic are adequately available to permit students to collect materials and to be able to identify and discuss controversies within the subject area. Third, for many departments the program would serve as an important training ground for the intercollegiate, debaters and the research for the course could thereby support efforts of the competitive debate squad. Fourth, students involved in competitive tournaments could benefit by exposure to other classroom formats used in examining the controversies relevant to the debate topic. In any case, the topics used for conflict exercises merely serve as a substantive vehicle for developing conflict communication skills.

The strength of this approach comes from the variety of situations set up to practice and demonstrate conflict communication skills. The laboratory situations range from informal dyads and groups (in which the participants themselves discuss, negotiate, and decide upon the communication rules to be followed) to the formal debate (in which two or four people interact in role-assigned ways following the quasi-formal rules of academic debate). In the former situations the participants determine the "best" position at the end of the exercise, preferably through consensual agreement, while in the debates a third party renders a judgment as to which position was most

effectively presented and defended. At each of the three basic stages of the program students participate in both cooperatively and competitively structured conflict interactions. The number of students involved in a specific exercise varies from two to six. In most cases the interactants discuss and determine the rules to follow in conducting the conflict, e.g., they decide the frequency and manner of interruptions, the forms of argument that are acceptable, and the reasons for following these rules. The procedures adopted at one point in time may be changed later by mutual agreement of the participants. Throughout the course students (by being involved in a number of different situations) are alerted to the need for the identification of and/or adjusting to the communication rules of the immediate situation and developing behavioral flexibility.

During the program various adaptations of academic debate formats are used to represent the formally rule-governed conflicts. For example, at times the 8-3-4 format (8-minute speech, 3 minutes of questioning, and a 4-minute speech) is used in which each person initiates, maintains, and defends the same basic position and attacks the opposing position on the controversy. At other times a 6-2-3-2-3 format (6-minute initial speech, 2 minutes of questioning, 3-minute speech, 2 minutes of questioning, and 3-minute summary speech by each participant) permits the student to present an opening position on a controversy, respond to questioning, and adapt and modify his approach to the conflict in light of the arguments and supports used by others. Briefer formats are used early in the course, while the more extended debates are used later on.

Sensitizing students to different communication rules that operate in various conflictful situations is a key feature of the program. Therefore, the exercises should provide opportunities in which the students themselves

discuss and agree upon the conflict communication rules to follow while on other occasions they participate in forms of formal debate for which the rules are established by an outside party. It is in the latter category that competitive academic debate can provide a valuable learning laboratory. Students who wish to do sc may participate in intercollegiate debates and attempt to adapt to the formalized, stylized rules of communication adhered to therein. We emphasize to students that the competitive experience dictates certain standards for managing conflict and that behaviors appropriate in that situation may well violate communication rules in other social situations. Presumably, the participants are benefitted by the flexibility needed in discovering, identifying, perhaps negotiating, and/or adapting to the formal and informal communication rules which function in a variety of life situations and which create differing expectations of that which comprises appropriate behavior.

Fundamentally, we feel that he placing of conflict communication training (with debate as one expression thereof) within the larger system of speech-communication education is vital. It provides a pedagogically healthy and useful perspective for the instructor (i.e., "I'm not trying to do everything.") and enables students to appreciate the strengths and limitations of various forms of substantive and procedural conflict management. Students should be alerted to the deliberate exclusion of such issues as affective conflict; the skills for managing those conflicts must be learned elsewhere. By using communication rules as a thematic concept, students should be aware of their important function in all human communication and that such stylized conflictful interactions as found in the law courts and academic debate may be viewed as examples of communication following formal, codified rules. As such competitive debate may be a useful learning laboratory for

students to develop certain conflict management skills while adapting to a highly rule-governed situation. It is within this broader perspective that we think debate training can contribute in an important way to undergraduate speech-communication programs.[14]

Footnotes

[1]The idea for the title comes from Amitai Etzioni's article "On Self-Encapsulating Conflicts," The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 4(1964), 242-249. Etzioni used the term "encapsulation" to refer to "the process by which conflicts are modified in such a way that they become limited by rules (the 'capsule') (p. 242);" the rules apply to the means and modes of conflict expression. The principle was illustrated by international, societal, industrial, and labor-management conflicts. On most occasions the rules followed were determined by direct negotiation between the two parties while in others intervention by a third party was an influence in establishing and maintaining the "capsule." In our estimation, Etzioni's discussion takes on much broader significance when viewed from the perspective of communication rules. In effect, such a perspective conceives of virtually all conflict interaction as following rules. The "capsule" may be established and enforced by a third (outside) party by direct agreement of the conflicting parties or by following informal expectations of proper behavior. It is in this way that Etzioni provided the conceptual starting point for the present essay and the conflict communication training program discussed herein.

[2]Many persons in the field of speech-communication view the debate tournament circuit negatively. They see it as a distorted approach to examining and resolving problems and as an overly stylized and counter-productive activity for developing analytical and speaking skills. On the other hand, others view the tournament circuit as a positive learning experience. They see it as providing students with the opportunity through repetitive and intensive exercises (i.e. the debates) to gain a mastery of certain research, analytical, and speaking skills. However, it seems to us that persons representing both view points too often disregard the place of debate in the larger system of speech-communication education.

[3]Excellent discussions of the philosophical and theoretical implications of communication rules can be found elsewhere. For examples see: Donald P. Cushman, "The Rules Perspective As A Theoretical Basis For The Study of Human Communication," Communication Quarterly, 25(1977), 30-45, Donald P. Cushman and Gordon C. Whiting, "An Approach to Communication Theory: Toward Consensus on Rules," Journal of Communication, 22(1972), 217-238; and Stephen Toulmin, "Concepts and the Explanation of Human Behavior," pp. 71-104 in Human Action, ed. Theodore Mischel (New York: Wiley, 1969).

[4]See: Richard V. Farace, Peter R. Monge, and Hamish M. Russell, Communicating and Organizing (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Company, 1977).

[5]B. Aubrey Fisher, "Conflict Management Research From An Interaction Rules Perspective," paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Central States Speech Association, April 1976.

[6]In the paper noted previously, Aubrey Fisher argued that "rules . . . do not 'govern' relationships. Rather regularities are said to 'follow' or 'conform' to rules. That is, rule-following behavior inherently involves choice on the part of the behaver. Given a situation in which a rule is

invoked, the behaver chooses to conform to the rule . . . choosing not to follow a rule does not invalidate the existence of the rule but serves only to assess the strength of the rule as an explanatory device. In this sense, we would say that the regularity of behavior exists as a rule which has exceptions, of course (p. 5)." Fisher essentially reserved the use of the term govern for physical laws and properties.

While we regard his description of the function of a rule as illuminating, he seems rather arbitrarily to associate the term "govern" predominantly with the immutable laws if the physical universe. The notion of following or conforming to rules is useful, but so is the use of the concept of governing as it implies the direction or influence of interactants' expectations of appropriate behavior in the action or conduct of human communication. Therefore, we use the word in its social sense.

[7]Tom Knutson, "Conflict Resolution Teaching Materials and Strategies," short course presented at the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, December, 1976.

[8]See: Mae Arnold Bell, "The Effects of Substantive and Affective Conflict in Problem-Solving Groups," Speech Monographs, 41(1974), 19-23; Thomas J. Knutson and Albert C. Kowitz, "Effects of Information Type and Level of Orientation on Consensus-Achievement in Substantive and Affective Small-Group Conflict," Central States Speech Journal, 28(1977), 54-63.

[9]Cushman and Whiting, p. 217.

[10]Cushman and Whiting, pp. 217-218.

[11]In daily interactions with one another the communication rules which a person follows and expects others to follow are influenced by several factors. We assume that cultural patterns provide some general parameters for social encounters. For most U.S. Americans, the query "Hey, how are you?" is not likely to be a request for a physical, emotional, or financial inventory but merely an elongated "hello." (That does not deny that such a question may elicit a detailed response if posed in the home of a close friend or in the office of a physician or counselor. These relationships and situations likely influence the choice of rules one observes.) If a person in our culture wishes to avoid verbal interaction with another, he may avoid direct eye gaze if the other is within about ten to fifteen feet. Moreover, the social context affects the choice of rules because the immediate setting and relationship with the other guide the kinds of behaviors and individual considers appropriate. Further, communication rules followed in one's behavior are influenced by personality, family patterns, and previous social encounters. Regardless of the sources of the communication rules for a person the point is that each person brings communication rules to interactions, and the rules usually vary with different situations.

[12]In recent years, several regional debate tournaments have had coach/critics prepare some written statement about their own judging criteria. The intent is to let the debate participants know (rather than guess) how a specific judge evaluates a debate--how the critic interprets the procedural rules for debate. Also, in recent years, seminars have been scheduled during

tournaments in which coaches and debaters are encouraged to discuss questions of argumentation and debate theory and practice. This effort has served to underscore both similarities and differences in judging philosophies and alerted coaches and debaters alike to the various communication rules followed by critics.

[13]The discussion of communication rules and interpersonal conflict can be effectively integrated by examining how the rules function within conflictful interaction. At this point, then, we are concerned with the subset of communication rules that operate when two or more persons communicate about issues on which they disagree. Some of the questions that may be helpful in analyzing informal conflictful exchanges could be: 1) How is disagreement expressed? 2) Are points of difference explicitly identified or do they emerge through suggestion and circuitous questions or in some other way? 3) Is discussion of conflict permitted? 4) What kinds of "reasons" are used by and persuasive for the interactants? 5) On what kinds of issues is disagreement expressed? 6) Do the individuals respond by ignoring, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, or problem solving? 7) What specific behavioral evidence can be found to substantiate observations made? 8) How do the interactants manage/resolve/terminate the issue of the conflict? 9) How satisfied are they with the rules displayed by themselves and other interactants? The basic purpose of such questions is to assist students in identifying what communication rules operate for a person in conflictful interaction (including those imposed by one on oneself and on others as well as those imposed by others). After some discussion of these questions, specific application is made to the more formalized debate context.

[14]Justification for presenting our perspective stems from the substantial growth we have experienced in our debate program. In our department, the competitive program had dwindled during the late 1960's and early 1970's until it was finally abandoned in 1973. Minimal staffing and funding were provided, however, in 1975 to reestablish competitive participation. During the past two years, while applying the perspective discussed above we have grown from four participants during the first year to over twenty actively involved debate participants during the current academic year. Students have been enthusiastically positive about the educational values of our program, and their excitement has served to generate broadly based student, faculty, and administrative support. Overall, the increased attention has served to emphasize the values of speech-communication education for undergraduates.